

Introduction

If you're an early childhood teacher, no doubt your head is full of tugging voices and questions: What are the children really learning as they play? How should I handle all this pressure for school readiness? What will reassure parents that I'm a competent teacher? How long can I really stay in this job?

Competing interests in young children's futures storm around and within us. Early childhood teachers feel so much pressure to shape children into what society expects of them. In quieter moments we long to be with children in a different way. Then the prevailing tide rushes in with the language of standards, outcomes, and accountability. The wonder of childhood is pulled under and washed away once more, and with it, our love of teaching.

Waiting for you in the eye of this storm is the art of awareness and the joy of paying close attention to children. With close observation you can refocus, see the value of childhood, and remember why you wanted to be a teacher. You can learn to integrate the concerns of these contesting voices and a full measure of delight can return to your work with children. If observation is already part of your teaching practice, you may find an expanded focus here. If it isn't at the center of your practice, developing the art of awareness may transform your teaching.

Refocusing Our Work

The early childhood profession faces a critical juncture. We have come of age as a full-fledged profession with a core body of knowledge, code of ethics, professional standards, accreditation system, credentials, literature, and conferences. These developments are all wonderful, but for practicing teachers they often translate into giving more attention to checklists and paperwork systems than to the actual children, reflecting the overall trend in U.S. culture of overlooking the insights children offer.

In the United States there is no clear vision for the value of children or the role of childhood in our collective lives. We are willing to entertain children, make products for them to consume, and prepare children for adulthood, but we don't earnestly give them much attention for who they are right now. Except for brief moments of crisis, holidays, or campaigning for elections, rarely do the lives of children get public attention, nor do we hear people discussing how they enrich our humanity and our overall culture. Even parents and teachers fail to notice what children notice or let them lead us to new awareness and appreciation for their time of life.

Professor and author David Elkind reminds us that in the last fifty years our country has become more and more adult oriented, with children increasingly viewed as a nuisance. Shopping malls, casinos, health clubs, and the Internet have all been conspicuously developed as places for adults to gather. Parks,

neighborhoods, and schools have been neglected. Most early childhood and school-age programs are isolated from the rest of the world, contributing to this generational apartheid in our communities. Strange as it seems, early childhood workplaces have grown to mirror, rather than transform, the invisibility of children in our society at large.

We are engulfed in a world of freeways, fast food, and electronic media. Commercialism has taken over the fabric of our lives, transforming our experience of play into the consumption of entertainment products, spinning our holidays into a frenzy of competitive shopping, and impacting our sense of ourselves as always needing to have and be something we are not. It becomes harder and harder for adults to remember who we want to be and what brings us deep pleasure or a sense of meaningful purpose in our lives.

The early childhood field itself is a clear target of commercial interests, even as we are marginalized and devalued in the overall allocation of resources and public attention. We, too, often behave as if we've lost our way, following the latest trend, rather than steadily cultivating a vision for ourselves. In our professional meetings and conferences, we are persuaded to spend our time rushing rather than relating, and consuming rather than creating. Our professional development and gatherings rarely focus on children's words, feelings, experiences, or thought processes.

Taking Up the Invitation

Children can awaken in us an understanding of what it means to be inventive, engaged, delighted, and determined to rearrange the world. If we listen to and watch them closely, they will teach us to be more observant, inquisitive, and responsive in our work and overall lives. It isn't easy to pay attention to children in this way. So much conspires to take us in other directions, even in the early childhood profession. The daily crush of tasks and pleas for attention is enormous. Our requirements and paperwork systems, our schedules and meetings and learning goals, can easily push childhood out of the picture. Unlike children, we adults have so many pressing agendas that we often miss what is right under our noses. Children invite us to take a closer look. This book invites you to learn the art and skill of observation. Doing so has the potential to change your life, not just your teaching, for the better.

The late Anita Olds, an expert in designing spaces for early childhood, used to say of licensing requirements, "Children are miracles, not minimums!" They come to us full of wonder, eager to understand and be competent. Yet amid our good intentions to teach them, we adults easily begin to deplete children's innate wellspring of zest for learning. In *An American Childhood*, Annie Dillard puts it this way:

*No child on earth was ever meant to be ordinary, and you can see it in them, and they know it too. But then, the times get to them, and they wear out their brains learning what folks expect, and spend their strength trying to rise over those same folks (Anne Dillard, *An American Childhood*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998).*

When we neglect to see who children really are, we deprive ourselves of deeper sources of delight. We miss the opportunity to witness the profound process of human development that is unfolding before our eyes. Becoming a careful observer of young children reminds us that what might seem ordinary at a superficial glance is actually quite extraordinary. A string of ordinary moments for a child has been compared by Elizabeth Prescott to beads on a necklace, each one unique, yet related to the others, combining to create an unfolding work of wonder.

To be sure, some children don't appear to us as wonderful as others. They are the real challenges to our vision, sometimes requiring a magnifying glass to help us see what is really there. Whatever the stress and difficulties of our work with particular children, taking the time for deeper glimpses into their play, work, and thinking makes our jobs ones of continual exploration, invention, and flexible thinking. If we can keep our focus, we will get through the rough and bumpy times, past our blind spots, to find some new perspectives on even the most difficult children. Developing the ability to notice details and adopt different perspectives is a goal of this book. Bringing liveliness and enthusiasm to your work life is another.

Listening, Observing, and Documenting Is a Pedagogy

If we begin to value who children are, not just what we want them to be, a shift happens in the way we think about learning and teaching. Our jobs become more engaging and fulfilling. We also begin to envision a larger purpose for our profession—making childhood visible and valued for the ways in which it can enrich our humanity and contribute to our collective identity. To bring this transformation about, we need a *pedagogy* (a way of thinking about learning and teaching) that mirrors *our* vision for children, not the existing one of the popular culture. We need to move away from commercially packaged activities and make the time to develop curriculum collaboratively with our coworkers, the children, and their families. We must focus our attention away from the clocks and checklists to see what is going on with the children themselves. Teachers who subscribe to a pedagogy of this nature come from a place of curiosity, believe in children's capabilities, and know that they are engaging in a process that is unfolding, not static.

The benefits of this approach are far ranging. Moving children into the center of our focus teaches us more about child development, the learning involved in self-chosen play, and the components of a curriculum shaped around childhood. Looking closely, we can see the influence of cultural patterns and learn more about ourselves, our preferences, our biases, and our blind spots. Discussing our observations with coworkers and the children's families helps us to see things from different perspectives, allowing each of us to transcend the limitations of our own points of view. We create a collective context for mutual respect and learning from each other.

Gathering observation notes and other forms of documentation and broadcasting them as stories of children's pursuits gives them more visibility, meaning, and respect. The learning process is enhanced for the children as well as the adults. College teacher and author George Forman puts it this way:

We know that making children's ideas visible is an important goal. It helps children convert an activity into a learning encounter. Therefore, if documentation helps children make their own feelings, patterns of behavior, theories, and rules more visible and explicit, then documentation could become the primary means of educating young children (On-line dialogue on Reggio discussion list, 1999).

Where can we see this pedagogy in action? Many would point to the schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy and the schools they have inspired around the world, including in the United States. We can see the seeds of this approach in the teaching and writing of college instructors Elizabeth Jones, John Nimmo, and Gretchen Reynolds. Their books, referenced throughout the chapters of this book, are rich with descriptions of children's play and teachers negotiating their roles in it. Teachers can turn to their writing again and again for reminders and inspiration of how children's lives can be valued and our differing perspectives on them negotiated.

Several practicing early childhood teachers have also written books, giving us a firsthand, vivid picture of how this pedagogy has been developed in their classrooms. Ann Pelo is a preschool teacher-author working in a full-time child care program. Her teaching is featured in three videos, *Children at the Center*, *Setting Sail*, and *Thinking Big*. She describes her evolving pedagogy of listening, observing, and documenting in the book she co-authored with Fran Davidson, *That's Not Fair!*

When I first began the practice of taking notes about children's play and making recordings of children's conversations, I didn't really understand how to use all the documentation I gathered. I did it because I'd read about it being the Right Thing to Do. I'd carefully transcribe a recorded conversation among children, then go on with the plans I'd already made. I mostly thought of the notes and conversations as ways to capture on paper the sweet and appealing thinking of young children. I'd share my transcriptions with parents, inviting them to "listen in" on conversations that they would otherwise miss.

As I grew into the practice of supporting emerging projects, I learned more about how to use the documentation that I collected. I noticed myself wishing to understand if my guesses about the children's interests were on target or way off base, knowing that it mattered deeply to the success of an emerging project. I began to turn to my carefully collected notes for guidance. When I studied my notes and transcriptions alone or with a co-teacher, I could see "underneath" the children's words to

the themes and issues undergirding them. I noticed when ideas were repeated, or when a theme showed up over and over. I began to see through to the heart of children's play. And with that understanding, I could respond in meaningful ways, taking an active role in shaping an activism project. I could better supply the classroom with props that would sustain children's play. I could plan trips or invite visitors to the classroom. I could ask provocative questions of the children. I could develop strategies for the children to represent their thinking. Listening to the children is my best guide for supporting emerging projects; the documentation I collect while the children play and talk deepens my listening (That's Not Fair! A Teacher's Guide to Activism with Young Children. St. Paul: Redleaf Press, 2000).

First-grade teacher Karen Gallas has written three books charting her journey as a teacher who makes children's words, actions, and artistic expressions a focal point for her own development. In her book *The Languages of Learning*, Gallas describes her pedagogy of creating the classroom as a research community.

*This process of data collection is ongoing. It becomes part of the life of the classroom and is absorbed into the interactions between teacher and students. Thus, over the course of a school year, I compile an enormous amount of information that helps me to reflect on the classroom and to answer my more difficult questions about teaching, learning, and the process of education.... As a teacher-researcher, I do not determine beforehand the categories of information I am looking for, the nature of the data, or the questions to be asked. Data collection is not a process used only for assessing children's learning or evaluating curricula. The process of data collection, as it has evolved, has become a central part of my classroom practice (Karen Gallas, *The Languages of Learning*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).*

Perhaps Vivian Gussin Paley is the best-known classroom teacher and author, with at least ten books published. Her writing simultaneously makes visible the richness of children's perspectives and the thinking process of an evolving teacher. In describing how her approach to teaching evolved, Paley says that in her early days of teaching, she found herself having trouble remembering who each of her twenty-six to thirty kindergartners were. At night she would develop schemes to try to remember each of their names, all of which failed. It was only when she set herself the task of writing a few sentences about something each child did or said that she solved this problem and began to know each individual.

This strategy engaged Paley for a while, but as it became routine, she found herself getting bored. "Bored!" exclaimed a teacher listening to this story. "How could you possibly be bored with twenty-six to thirty children to tend to? You must have been frantically busy!"

"Of course, I was extremely busy," Paley replied, "But that's very different than being bored."

When I say I was bored I don't mean with the children, I mean with myself and my job. I didn't find myself very curious, emotionally or intellectually engaged [in] what was going on. And because I was basically too lazy to go out and look for another job, I decided I had better make this one more interesting. So I began to create little games for myself which forced me to watch more closely what was going on. I'd try doing something one way with the morning group and then a different way with the afternoon class and then asked myself what worked better. I experimented with questions about how the boys and girls might respond differently, about what other activities might be least interfered with by the loud noise of carpentry, and so on. And, of course, once I approached my work with this kind of inquiry, everything changed for me. I discovered the remarkable world of children's perspectives and the unending delight of trying to understand the meaning of their play and stories (Personal conversation with the author, October 1999).

Becoming a Keen Observer

What will it take for our early childhood classrooms to be filled with teachers who view children and their work with this mindset? Ann Pelo, Karen Gallas, and Vivian Gussin Paley offer us valuable models for how teachers can develop themselves from closely watching the development of children. Each of them has developed a teaching practice based on their deep respect for children and curiosity about who they are. Their curriculum leads to the same learning outcomes aimed for in conventional lesson plans but they use an emergent planning process with more meaning and relevancy for the children.

Becoming a keen listener and observer is certainly the foundation of the art of awareness. If you consult a dictionary, you discover that the definition of the word *keen* includes "showing a quick and ardent responsiveness; enthusiastic, eager, delighting in the chase, intellectually alert, extremely sensitive in perception" (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 10th Edition*. Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, Inc., 1993).

But rather than fostering "a delight in the chase," most instruction on observation makes it a tedious, arduous process, hardly the experience that Pelo, Gallas, and Paley describe. As teachers face increasing requirements to use checklists and complete assessments, observing loses even more vitality. A profession that allows this to happen sacrifices one of the most joyful, engaging, and intellectually stimulating experiences readily available to teachers. Children, in turn, lose the possibility of having their play and ideas taken seriously. Their activities are less likely to be what Forman describes as "learning encounters."

When you see your primary role as a teacher as closely observing children and communicating what you see, you find yourself surrounded by learning

encounters. Becoming a keen observer is a way to learn child development, to find curriculum ideas, and meet requirements for assessing outcomes. It's also a way to keep from burning out in a stressful job. *The Art of Awareness* offers you a series of activities to develop yourself toward that end.

Using This Book

This book begins with a series of study sessions designed to heighten your observation skills. These chapters differ from other texts on observing, because they are designed to help you learn to really see children, not for the purposes of analyzing or doing anything to or for them, but simply to value who they are and the experience of childhood. The study sessions offer you activities to help you replace what you hope to see, any labels or preconceptions you might have, with a simple appreciation of the descriptive details of what you are actually seeing. We all observe subjectively and with the filters of our own experiences and values.

The first three study sessions offer foundational ideas and practical strategies to heighten your self-awareness, because the more aware you become of influences on your ability to hear and see, the closer you get to objectivity. These sessions are followed by a series of chapters focusing your study on specific aspects of childhood. Again, you will be asked to let go of your adult agenda or teacher urge to *do* something with what you are seeing, replacing this with the goal of really seeing what's there. In the Buddhist tradition this is referred to as *mindfulness*.

With these study sessions under your belt, the remaining three chapters of this book will offer you ideas and strategies for using your observations, getting organized and developing a documentation system for yourself, and finally, making your observations visible to others.

Throughout all the chapters of the *Art of Awareness* are photographs and observation stories, often with transcriptions of children's conversations. These will be as valuable to you to study as the text itself. You will also find examples of teachers' self-reflections and communications with the children's families to give you a picture of how observations can be used.

At the end of each chapter you will find a list of resources for further study when time permits. These include authors who are artists and naturalists, as well as practicing teachers and college instructors. They offer opportunities to further your thinking, sharpen your skills, and nourish your spirit. Ultimately, these resources and the way of being with children promoted in *The Art of Awareness* should enhance your life far beyond your job.

Living in the details of the human spirit leads to more mindfulness, liveliness, and overall pleasure in our lives. If we take the time to notice, each child offers us a glimpse of something promising in the world. When we make what we value and notice more visible to ourselves and to others, it becomes a resource for change. We create an active vision for becoming individuals and a collective culture that holds children and childhood as sacred and worthy of our utmost attention.